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ASIA'S HAWKERS PROVIDE USEFUL SERVICES

by YUE-MAN YEUNG

In many cities in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere in the Third World, a significant proportion of the demand for goods and services is met not by shops and supermarkets, but by hawkers and vendors -- the often colourful street traders who are a familiar sight in most major cities.

In situations where urban unemployment and underemployment are a social problem, hawking and vending often provide viable occupations for many less skilled and educated people. They are also effective as final distributors of certain commodities, notably vegetables and unprocessed foods.

There is another side to this story, however. Many see the hawkers and vendors as a problem group, obstructing both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, creating unhygienic conditions, and posing unfair competition to legitimate merchants in shops and other businesses.

Both viewpoints obviously contain some truth, but they tend to be based on opinion rather than fact. For in spite of their historical and contemporary importance, little was known until recently about hawkers and vendors, the nature and role of their activities, even their numbers.

In an attempt to better understand the hawker and vendor phenomenon in Southeast Asia, Canada's International Development Research Centre supported a multi-country comparative study focusing on six cities in three countries -- Jakarta and Bandung in Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca in Malaysia, and Manila and Baguio in the Philippines.

Begun in 1973, the study was aimed primarily at understanding the role of hawkers in the marketing system in each of the cities and entailed both an enumeration of the total numbers and types of hawkers in each city, as well

as detailed studies of a cross-section of individual hawkers and vendors.

It was estimated that the total number of hawkers ranged widely, from 765 in Baguio, to 50,000 in Jakarta. This wide range reflects in part the very large differences in the size of population of the cities under study. It is also accounted for by the varying roles hawkers play in each urban distribution system.

The findings on the hawkers' personal characteristics strengthen the view that hawking is an occupation of last resort. Most hawkers have received up to six years of education, and are predominantly male, except in Philippine cities.

One of the stereotypes of hawking is that it provides an entry into city life for rural in-migrants, who often arrive in the cities lacking in education, special skills, and capital. Surprisingly, the study reveals that this is true only in Jakarta. In all the other cities surveyed, a large proportion of the hawker population consists of native-born city residents who have been hawking for many years.

In Hong Kong and Singapore, where internal migration is much more controlled, the hawker community is well entrenched. Almost 61 percent of Hong Kong hawkers, for example, have been in business for over 10 years. Most had never worked at any other job. And, although a large number of those interviewed indicated that they had taken to hawking for negative reasons (such as lack of other job opportunities), a significant proportion cited positive reasons, and some successful Singapore hawkers even said they would encourage their children to continue the family business.

Most of the hawker units (80 to 90 percent) are individually or family owned. Family and kinship bonds are fully utilized in the economic operation of these businesses, so that regular paid assistants are seldom employed. The hawkers may or may not pay a licence fee to the city government. The daily incomes of most hawkers are small, with two-thirds falling in the marginal and sub-marginal categories. They usually work long and irregular hours.

The value of an individual hawker's stock is generally low -- a large stock requires capital, and there is also the risk of confiscation if he or she infringes upon the rules, or is unlicensed. The bulk of the goods sold is obtained within the city, and very few originate from outside of the country.

Generally speaking, hawkers and vendors are found at places of high population concentration, such as markets, cinemas and other public places. However, the surveys also revealed distinct ecological niches in the cities where the hawkers operate to cater to a consumer market not otherwise adequately served by the regular city distribution system. The system of travelling night markets in Singapore attests to the hawkers' ability to identify gaps in consumer demands and respond to changes in market conditions over time.

In the surveys, 40 to 50 percent of the hawkers lived within ten minutes' walk from work to reduce travel time and cost. The customers, most of whom are regular, are mainly from the immediate neighbourhood. These patterns of restricted trade area, neighbourhood clientele, and regular patronage likewise emerge strongly in Hong Kong and Singapore where attempts to relocate hawker operations by a distance of a few blocks have resulted in sharp declines or even failures in business.

It should not be assumed that the hawkers are a homogeneous section of the urban community; it must rather be emphasized that hawkers are in fact a highly diverse group. Just as economic conditions in Southeast Asian countries vary widely, the hawker situation reflects and is tied each country's economic development. Government policies directed at hawkers would necessarily have to be different in each country and, in fact, in each city within a country.

And indeed, hawker policies pursued by the various city governments do diverge substantially. Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, saw a rapid increase in the number of hawkers in the immediate postwar years. The official policy towards hawkers then was negative, but arrests, jail sentences, and stiff fines failed to provide a solution. Gradually, as economic progress was made, the problem receded and the administrators adopted a correspondingly more positive attitude towards the hawkers by providing the space and environment for them to operate, a policy that has culminated in Singapore by the recent decision

to resite all hawkers in permanent and sanitary hawker centres. A recent labour shortage in both countries has led, however, to policies to check the growth of the hawker sector in order to redirect available manpower to industries.

Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia appears to have adopted a most positive and benign policy towards hawkers. Hawking or petty trading is seen by the Malaysian authorities as an avenue through which the indigenous population, the Malays, can participate in the hitherto Chinese dominated marketing sector, a policy that is consistent with an objective of the Second Malaysian Plan which aims at restructuring the Malaysian society by assisting the Malays economically. Consequently, institutions such as the Mara Institute of Technology offer courses in commerce which can be of use to petty traders, and loans on easy credit terms to hawkers.

In other surveyed cities, official attitudes towards hawkers generally tend to be negative. In Manila and Jakarta, for example, hawkers are constantly removed, though to no visible effect. Their useful services notwithstanding, the hawkers pose a great problem because of their large numbers, but with the many more pressing issues that cities like Manila have to contend with, the hawker problem is relegated to low priority. However, a re-assessment of developmental priorities, which at present tend to favour the modern sector with more visible developmental returns, seems warranted. The need to develop the traditional sector appears to deserve more official attention that is presently given.

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